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# **Migrant Workers, ‘Modern Slavery’, and the Politics of Representation in Italian Tomato Production**

## **Introduction**

This paper examines what gets represented when, by whom, and for what reasons in Italian tomato production. It begins with a snapshot of the tomato economy and provides an overview of our research into it. It then analyses the hegemonic and counter-hegemonic representations of the Italian tomato, before offering our own, ethnographically informed alternative depiction of its production. The hegemonic image is associated with the Universal EXPO in Milan, painted and promoted by agro-capital, global retail chains, and the state. It features a bucolic countryside bounteous with the fruits of ‘*Italianità*’ – a key ingredient of ‘Made in Italy’ branding – and contains no space for the migrant worker who is so central to the tomato harvest. The second, counter-hegemonic image is a direct response to this. Projected by civil society actors including labour unions, religious organisations and other ‘modern abolitionists’, it features labour front and centre, depicting a countryside full of ‘slaves’ and ‘gangmasters’. Mobilising pity and shame in an effort to generate advocacy energy, it seeks to reform Italian agro-capitalism into an ethical alternative. The third image provides the basis of a critique of the previous two. It is drawn from ethnographic research with those at the foot of the tomato economy and emphasises the structural (rather than individual) violence of which their lives are an expression.

## **Context and Research**

The tomato is a critical commodity within Italian agro-capitalism. Italy produces more tomatoes than anywhere in Europe, while only the US and China produce more worldwide. Around 90% of production is destined for industrial transformation, the majority for export. In 2013, exports totalled nearly €1.5 billion<sup>i</sup>, with primary destinations including Africa and the EU. Danish supermarkets source the majority of their tomato goods from Italy, while no less than 75% of the UK’s tomato imports are Italian (IEH and ETI 2013: 2).

Tomatoes are generally grown in two Italian regions: Emilia-Romagna and the Capitanata Plain. Northern tomatoes are harvested predominantly by machine and processed by the major firms comprising the Northern industry association. Southern tomatoes are harvested mainly by hand and are processed by the many organisations comprising ANICAV<sup>ii</sup>, the consortium of tomato processors generating annual revenues of €1.5 billion (IEH and ETI 2013).

Although migrant workers never feature in the official iconography of the tomato, they play a significant role in its production. According to the national statistics office, 161,000 foreign workers work in Southern Italian agriculture. This represents 16% of the official agricultural workforce (Perrotta 2015: 197), with the real number higher (Caritas 2015; Corrado 2011: 195). In summer, between 13,000 and 20,000 migrants come to Capitanata alone for work in the tomato harvest (Perrotta 2015: 198)<sup>iii</sup>.

Our research into the tomato and the representative battles along its value chain took place in two phases. From January-June 2015, we familiarised ourselves with the business and civil society actors engaged in tomato valorisation. This involved mapping major market actors, reading reports and websites, interviewing representatives of trades associations, and visiting the Universal EXPO to analyse agro-capital's paradigmatic self-presentation to the world. It also involved analysing myriad publications, websites, news *reportages* and documentaries produced by civil society actors struggling over the apparent 'modern slavery' of migrant labour at the bottom of the supply chain, as well as interviewing those whom Avallone terms 'key informants' within it (2013: 74).

Our second phase was ethnographic, in and around the commune of Foggia, where we spent the 2015 tomato harvest. We chose Foggia as our case study for many reasons. First, it constitutes the epicentre of Italian tomato production. Puglia, the region of which it is part, produces one third of all Italian industrial tomatoes, while the province of which it is the capital produces more than any other in Europe (Fanizza 2013: 95). Foggia too plays host to Europe's largest agricultural transformation plant and each year sends millions of tomatoes across the *Appennini* to Salerno, the heartland of Italy's transformation industry.

Second, Foggia hosts a massive agricultural migrant labour community. *CGIL* estimates that 40% of Foggia's legally-registered agricultural workers are migrants, with the real figure likely to be higher. This makes Foggia the commune with the highest concentration of migrants in the entire country (Fanizza 2013: 95-7). Furthermore, although many of these workers reside permanently in and around the commune, their ranks are swelled every summer by the arrival of seasonal workers specifically for the tomato harvest.

Third, the fate of Foggia's migrant workers has generated major media and advocacy attention, becoming an iconic example of migrant exploitation in Italian agriculture and a progressive *cause célèbre*. The earliest NGO reports into living and working conditions date from the mid-2000s and feature sensational titles such as 'A Season in Hell' (Medici Senza Frontiere 2005). In 2006, Fabrizio Gatti wrote the decisive journalistic piece, 'I Was a Tomato Slave in Puglia'<sup>iv</sup>, and this sparked a steady stream of reports painting the migrant experience in stark colours resonant of many within the contemporary battle against 'modern slavery'. One of the key signifiers in these depictions is the informal settlement of Rignano Garganico, outside Foggia town, which is home to many seasonal labourers and is known as '*Il Gran Ghetto*'.

Fourth, Foggia represents a privileged site for investigation, in that it has received some scholarly attention from the handful of respected social scientists interested in these questions and yet has never been studied exhaustively by any one. Authors such as Perrotta (2013, 2014, 2014b 2015), Corrado (2011, 2013), Colloca (2013), Fanizzi (2013), Peano (2017), Dines and Rigo (2015, 2015) have all conducted important work in or around Foggia, but only Perrotta, Peano, Dines and Rigo have, to our knowledge, spent time in the Ghetto or spoken at length to the various actors involved at the lower echelons of the tomato economy.

Our research in and around the Ghetto involved interviews, participant observation and unstructured conversations. We observed living and working conditions among those

involved in the tomato harvest, made friends with permanent and transient residents, and were invited into people's 'homes'. We interviewed representatives of almost all 'classes' engaged in tomato production, including (seasonal) workers, labour brokers and respected figures in the Ghetto community. Outside the Ghetto, we observed and interviewed local government and civil society actors, landowning farmers, and farmer associations. In total, we interviewed over 40 people – including 25 migrant workers – and conducted informal interviews with many more. Our questions sought to make sense of the local organisation of labour, possibilities for labour resistance, trajectories into and out of the Ghetto and its harvest economy, power distributions in, around and beyond the Ghetto, relationships between actors differently situated along the value chain, and 'strategic thinking' on the part of civil society.

### **Hegemonic Imagery: Italian Pastoral**

The dominant image of the Italian tomato is that presented in commercials. Its components are pastoral and domestic, including bucolic vistas, jars of produce, busy kitchens, and happy families. Italian politics and agri-business spend tens of millions of euros promoting this image, and the global retail firms to which Italian agro-capital sells recycle it when they stock Italian products on their shelves. It forms part of, and trades on, the 'Made in Italy' brand, mobilising notions of 'Italian-ness', quality, beauty and taste (Barthes 1964). Although it has long been ubiquitous, it reached its apex at the national-cultural, political-economic *fiesta* that was the 2015 Universal EXPO in Milan, organised around the theme of 'Food'. Over the following section, we will trace the lines of this image using the illustrative lens of EXPO, and in particular its agri-business-sponsored pavilion, '*CIBUS è ITALIA*'<sup>v</sup>.

#### *An EXPO 'Made in Italy'*

In his foreword to the seminal volume, *International Marketing and the Country of Origin Effect: The Global Impact of 'Made in Italy'*, Nicolas Papadopoulos writes that 'the importance of made-in to Italy and of Italy to made-in is both self-evident and reasonably well understood, in Italy and elsewhere' (in Bertoli and Resciniti 2012: xi). This is because – as scholars of 'terroir' have long shown us (Trubek 2008) – 'where a product is made is [about] much more than "where a product is made"' (ibid. xi). It is about the creation and activation of the mental schemata structuring experience in and beyond the marketplace. 'Mental schemata' are extrinsically-cued short-cuts allowing us to explain complex phenomena in terms of easily accessible, stereotyped associations. They are what tells us that that a Ferrari is better than a Mazda 'without needing to do the research' (ibid.), or that Italy 'just means' 'craftsmanship' and 'high-quality products' (Weibel-Orlando 2011: 264). In Papadopoulos' words, 'Country of origin, or a place's made-in image, is one of the most powerful extrinsic cues in existence' (in Bertoli and Resciniti 2012: xi). The global branding of 'place', therefore, is integral to the workings of global capitalism.

Italian business knows this very well, and – along with the Italian state – spends vast sums ensuring that the rest of us do too (Pratesi 2001). This was everywhere in evidence at EXPO – conceived, in the words of former Italian Prime Minister Enrico Letta, as 'a chance to show [the world] *brand Italia*'<sup>vi</sup>, and thus to provide *capital Italia* with 'a unique business opportunity'<sup>vii</sup>. Its classic expression, at least from the perspective of this paper, came with the agri-business pavilion, *CIBUS è Italia*, built by the Italian

Food Industry Federation. *Federalimentare* describes itself as the ‘official global ambassador of Made in Italy’, collectively responsible for an annual turnover of €133 billion and for exports of over €26 billion<sup>viii</sup>. Its promotional video, available on its and on the EXPO websites, proudly declared that ‘Italy is food, food is Italy’. It described its pavilion as ‘dedicated to the excellence of food Made in Italy’ and to those ingenious businesses and growers spreading ‘the quality produced by our country’. It would play host to business delegations from around the world with a view to expanding exports, leading them through ‘an authentic food experience’.

## Picture 2: Tomatoes on the CIBUS è Italia Twitter Feed



Source: Screenshot of the CIBUS è Italia Twitter Feed<sup>ix</sup>

But just how ‘authentic’ was that experience? Unsurprisingly, not very, for it presented a highly sanitised picture of agro-industrial and socio-cultural harmony using display-cases and upbeat promotional videos. The first were highly fetishising, featuring finished secondary commodities such as tins of *pelati* or stacks of tomatoes wet with morning dew. While the second were fantastic: each video followed the same progression, using the metaphor of the lifecycle to document the journey ‘from field to fork’. The narratives began with the planting of the tomato seedling, moving through the harvest and factory-setting of industrialised transformation, before ending at a (white, wealthy) table. In the process, a hyper-organised system of production, accumulation and exploitation was equated with the natural and the harmonious, a cross between the pastoral, hyper-modern and traditional. Yet what was absent, of course, was that which is of greatest interest to this paper: no videos depicted the physical difficulty of the tomato harvest and none featured a single black face. All people presented were white, and all were either working in harmony at the interface of nature and heavy machinery, or at table about to be fed by a stereotyped Italian *nonna*.

## Picture 3: Photo of a promotional video at EXPO



*Source: Authors*

This cannot but recall Marx's famous take on 'commodity fetishism'. In *Capital*, Volume One, Marx bemoans the 'mystery of commodities, the magic and necromancy that surrounds the products of labour' (1976: 169). 'This finished form of the world of commodities', he complains, 'conceals the social character of private labour and the social relations between the individual workers' (ibid. 168-9). It hides the materiality of living labour (with)in the commodity form and (with)in that commodity's marketing and exchange. The worker's presence is subsumed and only her 'trace' remains (Derrida 1976) – and of this the iconography of the Italian tomato is a paradigmatic example. It erases the worker whose labour holds up the supply-chain, veiling the grit, grime and graft of production, hiding it both within the final-form commodity and beneath its 'Made in Italy' branding. Given how important 'values' are as well as 'quality' to Made in Italy (Weibel-Orlando 2011: 266), it is fair to suggest that such mystification is necessary for the maintenance of the brand itself<sup>x</sup>.

### **Counter-Hegemonic Imagery: Sensationalised Brutality**

By contrast, no such mystification is at work in the production of the counter-hegemonic image. This is the dialectical opposite of the first – over-emphasising the migrant worker's suffering to the extent that the hegemonic image erases his presence. Constructed and presented by the forces of civil society – consumer groups, liberal sections of mainstream media, labour unions and NGOs – it emphasises extreme and individualised degradation and exploitation, in the hope that this will mobilise business shame, governmental action, and consumer anger and pity. The image – as can be seen in certain of the examples below – relies heavily on sensationalist portrayals of suffering, sadness and exploitation, and deploys the emotive signifier of '(modern)



slavery'. Its core emphases are 1) migrant workers' difficult living conditions, and 2) the violence and brutality that are said to sustain their abuse.

**Picture 4: Screenshot image of inside a Ghetto dwelling**



*Source: Piazza Pulita*<sup>xi</sup>

Both of these emphases echo the consumer-centred struggles against historical trans-Atlantic slavery (Glickman 2009) and for today's 'fair' or 'ethical' trade (Hilton 2009, Ch. 4, Anderson 2015, Ch. 5, Barry 2004). The former aims to generate a 'politics of pity' (Aradau 2004), engendering sympathy in viewers in the hope that this will spark outrage and intervention. The latter aims to shame the major businesses benefitting from exploitation and the governments whose inaction allows them to do so. Both deploy affect to incite 'practical interventions...that envisage a re-structuring of the existing situation' (Aradau 2004: 254-6), presenting a version of 'suffering [that is] recognisable, something spectators can identify and sympathise with'. They also construct it as undeserved, 'since pity cannot be experienced towards the culpable and the dangerous' (ibid. 258-9; Boltanski 1999). Accordingly, they deploy simplistic narratives of responsibility which reinforce the binary between guilt and innocence (O'Connell Davidson 2015).

A good example of the first element of this strategy comes in the news report, '*Piazza Pulita*', from which the screenshots above and below are taken<sup>xii</sup>. *Piazza Pulita* is a current affairs programme taking more 'humane' stances on illegal immigration and labour exploitation.

**Picture 5: Screenshot of migrant workers showing Ghetto sanitation.**



Source: *Piazza Pulita*<sup>xiii</sup>

The episode examining Foggia's tomato harvest begins with a backdrop of the rapidly setting sun, darkness rising against a soundtrack of sinister music. 'In order to visit these Ghettos', the presenter whispers, 'you need to come at night. Migrants don't want cameras here, because they're scared that the police will come and chase them off'. The camera cuts to a pile of burning plastic, the narrator coughing to underline the point. Soon we see run-down portakabins with dirty toilets, and the narrator underscores the irony of surviving the Mediterranean crossing only to end up here.

**Picture 6: Screenshot of the Gran Ghetto.**



Source: *Piazza Pulita*<sup>xiv</sup>

The next Ghetto we see is the Gran Ghetto, where we conducted our fieldwork. This segment also begins with darkness and sinister music. 'In this *banlieue*', the narrator opines, 'there are men who've escaped war, escaped hunger'. 'Look at us', one interjects, 'look at how we live'. The camera shifts to close-ups: DIY-sewers, open ditches, shacks covered in plastic to protect against the rain. A Burkinabe describes his difficulties and the segment finishes with him lamenting the family left behind, his children unable to go to school. Both his story and the accompanying images evoke pity at his and his peers' powerlessness. The tropes of innocence, suffering and



deprivation, plus the focus on the familiar, all tell that what is at stake is ‘humanity’, and the fact that people ‘like us’ are suffering, defenceless in our midst.

**Picture 7: *Caporalato, Schiavitù and Pomodori.***



*Source: Radio Onda Urto<sup>xv</sup>*

The second element of the counter-hegemonic image emphasises exploitation. Its targets are: 1) the individuals directly exploiting migrant workers; 2) the big businesses indirectly responsible for that exploitation because they sit atop the supply chains incorporating their labour; and 3) the Italian government, whose inaction makes it indirectly responsible for everything. It works primarily to elicit shame on the part of those deemed responsible, and anger on the part of everyone else.

Two key signifiers are central to it. First is ‘*schiavitù*’ – ‘slavery’ – as the status to which migrant workers are apparently reduced when working in the Italian tomato harvest. Second is ‘*caporalato*’ – the system of gang labour brokerage organising much of Southern Italian agriculture and said to be directly responsible for reducing these workers to slavery and thus putting their labour at the service of unscrupulous corporate accumulation. *Caporalato* and *schiavitù* form a dyad within the counter-hegemonic imaginary and are well illustrated by the flagship civil society campaign, ‘*Stop Caporalato*’.

‘*Stop Caporalato*’ is organised by the agricultural branch of the *CGIL* labour union, in alliance with other civil society bodies, consumer groups and religious organisations committed to eradicating modern slavery. It builds on a long history of agricultural labour activism and draws on a well-established verbal and visual rhetoric. The image above, which is associated with it, echoes the imagery of anti-slavery consumer activists in the Nineteenth Century – even including the slightly ‘grainy’ pixilation. Black hands are raised in supplication, their enslavement denoted by being bound, and the agricultural root of this binding signified by the tomato vine that forms a chain around their wrists.

A textual parallel is found on the webpage announcing the launch of the campaign:

‘This campaign is necessary if we are to punish the terrible crime of *caporalato*. Gang masters are especially widespread in agriculture and in construction, both sectors employing hundreds of thousands of workers, especially migrants, who are stripped of their rights and reduced to the condition of slavery’<sup>xvi</sup>.

The language here is emphatic, violent and direct and is repeated consistently in articles<sup>xvii</sup>, reports<sup>xviii</sup> and interviews<sup>xix</sup> across the media landscape. A classic case of the politics of shame, it follows time-honoured tactics in the anti-corporate and consumer activist struggle. That is, it presents extreme yet individualised exploitation, characterises this as the equivalent of (modern) slavery, aims to embarrass the absent government for not protecting the innocent, and tries to shame the businesses benefitting from what it sees as injustice. As *CGIL*’s roving organiser put it to us:

‘Our logic is to “hit one and show them all”. As with *Apple* or *Nike*, we know that if we can show how much their supply chains use slave labour and *caporalato*, we can embarrass them. We can force them to accept a law on supply chain transparency, and we can force the government to act by banning *caporalato*’.

Such thinking is far from unique. As much of the highest profile literature on modern slavery suggests (Bales 1999, 2005, Kara 2010), this is a preferred tactic among many modern abolitionists (Page 2014, Kempadoo 2015), in line with other consumer activist approaches (Hilton 2009, Littler 2009, Dauvergne and LeBaron 2014, Anderson 2015). Be they pro- or anti-corporate, the strategy adopted works to elicit emotional-moral responses in the hope that this will incite actions for change (Page 2014, Kempadoo 2015).

### **An Ethnographic Alternative**

However, while we do not doubt the good intentions behind these efforts, our research persuades us that there are problems with them. Two are paramount. First, according to the migrants with whom we spent time, the images they rely upon are highly reductive and far from representative. The iconography of pity and extremity (mis-)represents migrant workers as agency-less victims caught in traps not of their own making. This objectification not only alienates the people it seeks to assist; it arguably precludes a more grounded politics of solidarity, fostering instead the kind of objectification that typically underpins damaging disciplinary interventions (Manzo 2008, O’Connell Davidson 2015, Walters 2017). Second, in our view, for all their intended critical bite, these efforts remain limited, in that their reliance on discourses of extremity and individuality reproduces the idea that exploitation is epiphenomenal rather than integral to the market. As such, they serve an unwittingly hegemonic function, reinforcing the power of major market actors by de-politicising the market itself (Howard 2018). Over the rest of this section, we aim to paint a more complex and contradictory picture of life at the lower echelons of the tomato economy, pointing in the process to an alternative approach to activism around it.

#### *The Social Organisation of Tomato Production in Foggia*<sup>xx</sup>

The chain of actors involved in the Foggian harvest economy begins with the multinational retailers who sell to Western consumers. These firms structure the lower levels of the tomato supply chain and their power is felt in nearly every socio-economic interaction within it because they are price-setters<sup>xxi</sup>. Collectively, they take €0.83 out of every €1 made from the sale of tomato-based supermarket products. The next level in the chain – the Italian agro-industrial firms processing harvested tomatoes into *passata*, *pelati*, or *salsa* – take around €0.10, leaving everyone else a share of merely €0.07.

Various different classes populate the ‘ground-level’ world of the tomato harvest. First are the landowning Italian farmers. They supply the capital inputs for the production of millions of tonnes of tomatoes across tens of thousands of hectares, which they sell to agro-industry for transformation. The price negotiation between farmer and industry is sometimes conducted by representative associations and is typically fraught, even if both ultimately depend on the prices set by the retailers. Although farmers and industry do deal directly with each other, they are physically and sociologically separated by the pivotal class of the transporters, who collect harvested tomatoes in specially fitted lorries before transporting them across Southern Italy.

The manual labour of the harvest is organised by the farmer and the labour-broker – the *caporale*, in counter-hegemonic terms. His role is fundamental, because he is responsible for scheduling the various different fields, sourcing the necessary workers, transporting them to and from the often isolated farms, and ensuring that they complete the harvest. The harvest is conducted predominantly by hand. Although machines are increasingly common, the majority of Foggian tomatoes are still picked manually, since better quality tomatoes are often damaged by harvesters. Workers are therefore necessary in large numbers for the intense period lasting from August through September. These workers – like their *caporali* – come mainly from either the eastern edge of the EU (Bulgaria and Romania) or from the various countries of West Africa. The EU citizens are in Italy legally (though their work is mostly informal), while the West Africans are divided into those who have papers (ranging from long-term residents to those awaiting asylum decisions) and those who do not (who have either arrived in Italy illegally or overstayed, having once been *in regola*). Although Europeans and Africans interact in the fields, the labour gangs are never mixed, with *caporali* mobilising workers according to personal contacts and, therefore, race.

Places like the Gran Ghetto are where many migrant workers spend their time. They are also home to the final class involved in the local tomato economy – the service provider class, which has emerged and built itself up around the itinerant population. These people run the many restaurants, bars, shops, and brothels operating especially in summer. A sizeable proportion of them are women, mostly in their 40s or 50s, who have been in Italy for a long time and are now transforming places like the Ghetto from seasonal tent cities into semi-permanent settlements in which African migrants seek social, cultural and financial solace.

### *Money Makes it Worth It*

The work of the tomato harvest is unquestionably hard, involving long, physically demanding hours bent double under the blazing Foggian sun. For some, it is too much – a typical work-day will begin at 4am, and can last anywhere up to 8pm. Workers work

in groups that vary in size from a handful to over a dozen. They typically receive between €3 and €3.50 per *cassone* of harvested tomatoes, and will commonly seek to fill ten *cassoni* a day. Some say that the *caporale* earns a small sum for each filled *cassone*, though others deny it. In any case, of the €30 to €35 that migrant workers (should) take home for each day's work, between €2.50 and €5 goes to the *caporale* to cover the 'costs' of transport to and from the fields. No-one involved in the harvest – including the *caporale* – gets paid immediately. Payment is delayed for everyone until industry receives its goods. Industry then pays the farmer, who pays the *caporale*, who pays the workers. This chain of payment, with all the delays it entails, necessarily offers opportunities for exploitation.

Structural conditions make work here anything from an acceptable to a desirable option for most migrant workers. Plenty consider themselves to be exploited, but none that we know of considers himself a modern slave, since all point to their circumstances (rather than any individual) as the primary coercive force they face. All of these men are relatively poor and need money to achieve their goals. For most, these include fulfilling the social and moral obligation to send money back to their relatives. But doing so regularly is made difficult by a combination of Italian economic stagnation, racism, and the exclusion of undocumented migrants from the legal right to work. As such, 'hustling' at harvest time is often the best option they have – and many travel from all over Italy to take it, before heading elsewhere for another harvest season.

Sekore is a good example. He is Malian, from the Kayes region, and 25 years old. An orphan, he is the oldest of three siblings and came here from Libya, where he previously spent time in construction. 'Of course work in the fields is hard', he said when we asked about conditions. 'It's also true that we're exploited. But I'm strong, and I came here to work'. In the month he spent in the Ghetto, he worked almost every day, filling an average of ten tomato boxes per day at €3 per box. This meant that after deducting €5 for transport and another €5 for food, he made around €500 during the harvest. For his brothers, likely among the 50% of Malians living on less than \$1.25/day, €500 would be enough for months. While for Sekore, it was enough to meet his basic needs, put some aside, and send some back.

### **Case Study 1: Abdoulaye**

Abdoulaye is Senegalese. He has been in Europe for 18 years, spending most of his time in Italy. At first he worked for a small company in Bergamo until it closed in 2002. He stayed on doing odd jobs, returned to Senegal for few months, and eventually decided to go to the UK. He lived in London for two and an half years, working mostly as a security guard. 'It was good', he says, 'I was paid well'. Yet eventually he had to return to Italy to renew his papers. From friends he heard that one can easily find work in agriculture in Foggia and so decided to come down for the summer. Currently, he is living in an abandoned house at the entrance of the Ghetto with a group of other Senegalese men. 'I work in the fields', he says. 'The work is very harsh, but I cannot complain. Also if I am too tired I just do not work'. Abdoulaye makes around €5 per box of tomatoes and also does various other odd jobs around the harvest. Because he speaks Italian and has papers, his options are greater than many of those who stay in the Ghetto. We ask him whether he considers life here to be like slavery. 'People here try to do their best', he says. 'Some are exploited more than others, but in the end things are tough for most of us. Take me for example: after 18 years in Italy I am here working

hard for very little money and without a proper contract. But that's what I've decided to do'. Because it is better than the alternative, which he describes as 'sitting around in Bergamo doing nothing all day'. At least here, he notes, 'I can spend my evenings sitting outside with friends, chatting and watching the people coming and going'.

### *Complicated Caporali*

Much maligned, the *caporali* play a fundamental intermediary role in the harvest of the Southern Italian tomato, valorising both their socio-cultural capital and their positionality as socio-cultural and economic intermediaries (Howard 2017). Unlike most of the migrant workers they put to work, they speak Italian and can communicate with farmers, while unlike farmers, they speak West African languages and can communicate with migrant workers. Many also have papers and are thus able to present a veneer of legality. *Caporali* typically spend weeks planning the harvests, organising which field to pick on what day and with how many workers. They cultivate relationships, liaise with farmers, build teams, and organise transport. Although they always extract surpluses, their role is so important that it is fair to say there would be no harvest and no money for anyone without them, which migrant workers commonly admit when blaming 'the system' more than its individual manifestations.

Yet *caporali* do often abuse the structural power they possess. None of the workers we interviewed, for example, views them with much fondness and everyone has a story about how – and for how much – he was held over a barrel by one of them. This is because *caporali* ultimately get to choose who works when, deciding the fate of thousands desperate for work. And this, in turn, enables them to impose conditions on workers that workers have to comply with in order to remain in favour. Common examples include paying for transport or buying food from the *caporale's* preferred Ghetto restaurant. Alternatively, it can mean accepting €3 per box of tomatoes on one day and €3.50 on another.

Claims of violence, however, are often overblown. For one thing, migrant workers in Foggia are all young men with a strong sense of right and wrong and violence on the part of a *caporale* would possibly be met with violence. Workers and *caporali* also live together in the Ghetto amidst moral communities that place limits on violence and regulate exploitation. More fundamentally though is the fact that physical coercion is simply unnecessary: 'dull compulsion' alone is enough to maintain labour discipline, because every migrant present needs work, many are without papers, and in a context of crisis and social marginalisation, few have better alternatives. It is exactly this which makes labour organising so difficult. We asked countless migrant workers whether they could combine and militate for higher daily rates, and to a man they said that doing so is impossible, 'because there'll always be a hundred others running behind us to take whatever is offered'. In this regard, *caporali* are better understood as facilitators of an unjust system than as architects of systemic injustice.

### **Case Study 2: Arfa**

Arfa is an Ivorian national in his late 40s. He comes from a 'political family' in Abidjan, and has been in Italy for 20 years. He is here legally and is one of the elders of the Ghetto community. He is a major labour-broker, and also owns one of the most vibrant,

sport-watching bars in the Ghetto, with his European wife and their children. We met and bonded over football; and over the weeks we talked again and again.

A major theme in all of our discussions is the dominant modern abolitionist discourse around *caporali*. For all its material lack, the Ghetto is a hyper-connected place. And Arfa, along with all the other established Ghetto figures, knows about this discourse. They read it online and see political, civil society, and union figures pronouncing it on TV. It enrages them – and the union representative who is most vocal in spreading it locally is now consequently a *persona non grata* in the Ghetto. ‘These guys mobilise stereotypes and scapegoats because it suits their purposes’, Arfa complains. ‘It attracts attention for their campaigns, and it attracts funding for them’.

In Arfa’s understanding, the *caporale* should be understood more as a ‘guide’ and as a ‘facilitator’. His role is one of mediation and organisation. He has his contacts and he brings people to work. He is someone who has a car, is legal, and speaks Italian. He goes around and asks farmers for work, then he plans the schedule and brings workers to do the job. He may earn a bit extra for his services and some more for transport. But he never siphons off people’s money. The people he puts to work are mostly people he knows and trusts. But of course, he underlines, the *caporale* is human – a human like anybody else – and when a young man comes crying desperate for work, he will be helped. ‘No one will go hungry here’, we are told.

As if to emphasise this point, he tells a story that elicits nods of pride from around the table. Last month a very well-dressed young man drove up to the Ghetto looking for Arfa. He was Malian, and he had become very successful over the past few years in Paris. He had come to Arfa to show his gratitude. Because eight years ago, when this young man had first arrived in Italy and knew no-one, he came to the Ghetto hungry, desperate, and lonely. Arfa found him in tears and shared his food with him. He then found the boy work. ‘I never forgot that kindness’, the boy is said to have said on his return.

‘What would really help people here?’, we ask Arfa. The answers are simple: ‘Give everyone papers, give them work, and leave them alone’.

### *The Ghetto As Hard But ‘Home’*

The Gran Ghetto can be a hard place to live and is not to be romanticised. Domenico Perrotta does not exaggerate when describing living and working conditions as ‘amongst the worst in Europe’ (Perrotta 2014b: 193). Hot, dusty and dry in summer; in winter, freezing cold and wet. Residents live in drafty wooden buildings, dispose of waste by burning it, and have limited water and sanitation facilities, provided irregularly by local authorities. Additionally, it can be a place of segregation: spatially, in that it is isolated and far from public transport; economically, since almost no-one there can access regular employment; and culturally, because migrants have next to no interaction with the Italian community beyond the farmers they encounter on the way to the fields (Perrotta and Sacchetto 2013: 58).

But the Ghetto is also far more than this. For many thousands of West Africans, it is at once a home, a refuge, and a place where money can be made. Few residents are able to find regular employment elsewhere, and yet all live under the constant pressure to



fulfil social duties by remitting money to families waiting across the Mediterranean. The Ghetto gives them a chance; it provides a material-social base from which to potentially access the underpaid, exploited, but better-than-nothing opportunities characteristic of much seasonal labour under capitalism. Moreover, it allows them to save money, since it is often the *only* place where they can find cheap and flexible accommodation, as well as access important services such as healthcare or legal counselling, through NGOs.

More than this, the Ghetto offers residents solidarity, social support, and a socio-cultural environment at once comfortingly familiar, largely beyond the reach of the law, and protectively far from the racist scrutiny of urban Italy. As one of its elder statesmen put it, ‘Guys come here because there’s solidarity. No one goes hungry, and here they’re at home. This isn’t like being in Rome or Milan; here people are friends. It’s like being in Africa’. And in many ways it is like being in Africa – it looks like countless peri-urban spaces dotted across that continent, with streets full of bikes, dogs and stalls, bars blasting Ivorian music, *buvettes* serving *pâte*, and football everywhere on TV.

**Picture 8: Man praying in a field beyond the bars of the Gran Ghetto**



*Source: Authors*

This matters to Ghetto residents. Ibrahim, another young Malian, put it bluntly when he said: ‘What the hell are you going to do in Milan on your own, with no work, no shelter, and no friends? Even if you struggle to find work here – which many do – you at least have company, you have people from where you are from, you are at home’. The importance and attraction of this simply cannot be underestimated in a land where men like him are visibly and legally ‘outsiders’.

**Case Study 3: Pierrette**

Maman Pierrette is an important figure in the Ghetto, splitting her time between there and Naples. In what she describes as her ‘past life’, she was married.

Her husband was a smuggler, and according to Pierrette a dangerous man. He used to bring women in from Nigeria, was very violent, and eventually made off with all their money. Pierrette eventually set up alone in Naples, a city she describes as hard, but

welcoming. 'There are people of many colours and classes, and there is work to do'. Like her mother, she is often a cleaner and a carer, while her youngest son goes to the local school.

Summer is when Pierrette comes to Foggia, or more precisely to the Ghetto, and bit by bit she is expanding her business in it. On one of the afternoons we meet, her restaurant is a building site because she has claimed lots of old wood dumped by a local Italian and decided to build a shop with it at the front of her bar.

Pierrette feeds on average 30 men a day, Ibrahim being one of them, and more spend their down time in the bar drinking beer, smoking or chatting. Her son runs around with them and the many other children here for the summer. 'No', she says, when we ask if she plans to let him work in the harvest, 'it's too tough. And he also has all the opportunities to do better – school, money, connections'. Her oldest children in Cameroon have gone to university and are becoming professionals, so her middle class ambitions are coming to fruition.

### Discussion

It is somewhat self-evident that major market actors fetishize production, obfuscate exploitation, and hide the lived realities of labour in their pursuit of profit. In the age of 'ethical capitalism' (Barry 2004), image is understood to be essential, and the hegemonic imagery discussed in this paper contributes to the maintenance of the Italian businesses valorising both the tomato and the Made-in-Italy brand. But this paper argues that the counter-hegemonic pushback against this fetishization is itself also highly problematic. Because although undoubtedly well-intentioned, it is at times simplistic, alienating, depoliticising, and potentially damaging.

Alienation is everywhere in evidence in the Ghetto. Despite her claims, the *Piazza Pulita* journalist mentioned above almost certainly did not film at night because residents feared the police; she did so because during the day people would have chased her away. 'We're fed up with people coming here like that', one Ghetto resident told us, 'taking pictures like we're zoo animals and then writing whatever crap they like'. Outsiders are routinely distrusted in the Ghetto, whether they be journalists, representatives of the authorities, or researchers. Perhaps most telling is the way that residents speak of the *CGIL* union officers who visit in the hope of fostering a labour movement. 'They're assholes out for themselves', one man said, 'and they're not welcome. They call us slaves on TV, and they do so for their own gain'.

Inherent to the politics of pity and shame described above is a kind of objectification (Burman 1994, Manzo 2008). Although the signifier of slavery is clearly successful in bringing campaigners welcome media attention, its use also inevitably angers many of the people who end up being labelled as slaves. Because the word 'slave' is typically associated with shame (Patterson 1982) and its accompanying tales of victimhood deny people their humanity, reducing the complexity of their lives to one-dimensional accounts of suffering. In this respect, the humanitarian, modern abolitionist gaze should itself be seen as a form of fetishization, constructed by looking *at* people rather than *with* them, and abstracting them from the messiness of their contexts (Burman 1994, Manzo 2008).

Worse still, this objectification has a tendency to foster unhelpful, unwelcome, disciplinary interventions that are destructive of socio-economic coping mechanisms and harmful to meaningful relationships. As was documented in the now-classic 2007 report, *Collateral Damage*, anti-trafficking interventions have a long history of destructively acting on people rather than with them (Dottridge 2007), and that history is repeating itself in the age of modern abolitionism (Bernstein 2010, O'Connell Davidson 2015, Walters 2017). In turn, it repeats an even older history documented in critical studies of 'development' (e.g. Escobar 1995, Li 2007). In this case, it is exemplified by a recent attempt to protect African labour migrants in Foggia by closing the Ghetto down and moving its residents on. Unsurprisingly, the 'beneficiaries' of this intervention neither welcomed nor accepted it and a number were injured in their attempts to resist. As part of the chaos that subsequently ensued, a fire broke out and two migrants died. Much of the Ghetto has now already been rebuilt.

What of de-politicisation? What systemic features are hidden by the reductive simplicity of the counter-hegemonic image? First, the fundamental importance of capitalism's 'dull compulsion'. Second, the existence of a socio-legal system creating 'disfigured persons' in Italy (and across Europe) excluded from the rights of full citizenship (Best and Hartman 2005; see also Anderson 2013, O'Connell Davidson and Okyere 2016). And third, the power dynamics governing value-capture along the tomato value chain which structure labour relations at its base.

On the first point, it will be obvious to most readers that no 'real' dividing line exists between free and forced labour, because unless you control the means of your own reproduction, your (waged) labour will always be somewhat forced from you (see, for example, Banaji 2003, Lerche 2007). This structural coercion is obfuscated when exploitative work gets characterised as '(modern) slavery' because that characterisation renders the normality of compulsion and exploitation discursively exceptional, and therefore outside the implicitly just world of 'free' market exchange (Page 2014, Kempadoo 2015, O'Connell Davidson 2015, Howard 2017). Second, migrant workers are so exploitable within Italian agriculture in part because they are denied the rights of European citizens. Other than the few who have papers, most have no recourse to public funds, no access to healthcare, and no legal protections in the labour market. They thus represent the classic neoliberal reserve army integral to agricultural regimes like the Italian (Peano 2017, LeBaron et al. 2018). Third, the scapegoating focus on the individual 'folk devil' *caporali* (Weitzer 2007) distracts us from those who really hold power within this field – the Tesco's and Carrefours at the apex of consumer society. These retailers are so big and their supply chains so integrated that they determine the distribution of value across the chain (Kaplinsky 2005, Lichtenstein 2010, Clapp 2012). The results are predictable – farmers are barely able to make ends meet and in order to stay in business they have to rely on illegal, underpaid, migrant labour. In this context, exploitable labour such as that provided by the Gran Ghetto should be seen as a structural necessity, without which tomato production would cease.

## Conclusion

Global retail capital, and in particular the Italian agro-capital with which it collaborates, fight hard to hide the realities of labour exploitation on their path to profit. They are largely successful. Tomatoes and tomato-based products earn hundreds of millions every year, as indeed do the many other agricultural commodities central to Italy's

economy. The Italian state is well aware of this, and it works hard to preserve the corporate branding of Made in Italy quality, with the EXPO only the latest and loudest example of its efforts.

Yet what we depict as the counter-hegemonic response is gaining traction across the public and political spheres. An impressive advocacy tradition has been built using the politics of pity and shame in Italy as elsewhere and it brings together humanitarian NGOs, labour unions, consumer campaigners, and other modern abolitionists. The success of their efforts is evidenced in the many news reports depicting Italy's 'agricultural slaves' or calling for an end to *caporalato* and the creation of more 'ethical agriculture'. Further still, a law has been passed outlawing *caporalato* and making farmers liable for using *caporali*.

Does this signify a turning of the tide towards 'ethical capitalism'? We are sceptical. As Page has pointed out, 'ethical capitalism' is the classic consumer capitalist response to relations of exploitation. It enables activists to 'do something' about the problem whilst protecting themselves from confronting the structures that engender it (2014). Even where it results in legal developments, it individualises causality, and in turn promotes technical, market-friendly 'fixes' that leave fundamental imbalances in wealth and power unaddressed. In this regard, it can be seen to constitute a 'fetishized de-fetishization' (Littler and Moor in Page 2014: 3), which ultimately entrenches the status quo by presenting it as technically perfectible (Littler 2009, Anderson 2015).

This suggests that the pity- and shame-heavy counter-hegemonic politics discussed in this article are limited. And in turn it begs the question of which alternatives may be superior. Our contention is that pity and shame should be replaced by structural critique. Civil society is certainly right to draw attention to the injustices represented by the Ghetto's existence; but it would be better doing so in *systemic* fashion, critiquing the whole system of which the Ghetto is an expression. This includes the Italian migration regime, its border policies, and the neoliberal governance of its agro-capitalism. Critique must transcend the simplistic scapegoating of individualised 'folk devil' baddies (Weitzer 2007) and mobilise resistance within and beyond existing relations of production.

At the same time, and perhaps more urgently, civil society should approach these workers and ask them what *they* think they need. They will likely say what they have said to us: better sanitation, waste disposal, a bus service linking the Ghetto to the town, and support in setting up credit unions. All of these are basic steps that could improve the Ghetto's immediate conditions, and in turn form the basis of a strategy built *with* these workers, in their interests. As yet, none form part of the mainstream modern abolitionist strategizing.

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<sup>i</sup> <http://www.italtrade.com>. Last accessed: 18/07/16.

<sup>ii</sup> *L'Associazione Nazionale Industriali Conserve Alimentari Vegetali*.

<sup>iii</sup> Many of these workers are irregular, but an *irregular worker* is not the same as an *irregular migrant*.

<sup>iv</sup> See: <http://espresso.repubblica.it/dossier/2006/09/01/news/io-schiavo-in-puglia-1.1306>. Last accessed: 18/07/16.

<sup>v</sup> Latin for 'Food is Italy'.

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- <sup>vi</sup> See: <http://www.enricoletta.it/press/ci-credo-piu-di-prima-e-lunica-vevtrina-del-brand-italia/>. Last accessed: 18/07/16.
- <sup>vii</sup> As per the EXPO ‘partners’ webpage: <http://www.expo2015.org/en/partners>. Last accessed: 18/07/16.
- <sup>viii</sup> See: <http://www.federalimentare.it/index.asp>. Last accessed: 18/07/16.
- <sup>ix</sup> See: <https://twitter.com/cibusitalia2015>. Last accessed: 18/07/16.
- <sup>x</sup> It should not be assumed, however, that industrial agro-capital alone is responsible for this fetishization. So too are farmers and their associations. *Coldiretti*, the influential farmer’s union, also trades heavily on ‘Made in Italy’ and thus had a similar presence at EXPO. Like agro-capital, it actively conceals the exploitation of migrant labour in the production of the Italian tomato (Interview with *Coldiretti* representative, Foggia, 09/09/15). So too do small-scale Puglian farmers and representatives of local government. We think this is because migrant labour invisibility is necessary for social reproduction. In the case of small farmers, it sustains ‘the grey economy’ that ensures their continued profitability. The ‘grey economy’ involves farmers hiring migrant labourers on regular contracts but putting them to work for more days than they declare. Workers work for below the legal rate, with farmers increasing the absolute surplus value they extract (Avallone 2013: 82). The difference between days declared and worked is then attributed to ‘fake workers’ – usually members of a farmer’s family or social network – who are registered as having performed days that they did not, with the beneficial consequence that they can access work-dependent welfare (2013: 57). As for the state, its very essence relies on invisibilizing migrant labour. Migrant labourers are integral to Southern agriculture, and thus to the accumulated wealth of the state, along with the services it provides. Yet these workers are neither represented by the state nor able to access its services. They exist at the margins and in the shadows, with basic healthcare provided by NGOs and the Church, and food and shelter sourced on the black market. They are thus an ideal example of neoliberalism’s disposable reserve army (Bakker and Silvey 2008).
- <sup>xi</sup> Available at: <http://www.iocisto.org/video/326-la7-piazzapulita.html>. Last accessed: 18/07/16.
- <sup>xii</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xv</sup> Available at: [www.radiondadurto.org](http://www.radiondadurto.org). Last accessed: 18/07/16.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Available at: <http://cgilfoggia.it/news/default.asp?id=2805>. Last accessed: 18/07/16. Our translation.
- <sup>xvii</sup> See: <http://espresso.repubblica.it/attualita/2015/09/02/news/puglia-schiavi-nella-raccolta-dei-pomodori-cosi-si-puo-combattere-lo-sfruttamento-1.227321>. Last accessed: 18/07/16.
- <sup>xviii</sup> See: <http://www.osservatoriomigrantibasilicata.it/da-face-magazine-it-caporalato-ce-chi-dice-no-in-puglia-ecco-chi-produce-nella-legalita/>. Last accessed: 18/07/16.
- <sup>xix</sup> See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xhUrvo2CiMY>. Last accessed: 18/07/16.
- <sup>xx</sup> Certain elements of this description reproduce a similar description in Howard (2017), ‘Of *Coyotes* and *Caporali*: How Anti-Trafficking Discourses of Criminality Depoliticise Mobility and Exploitation’. In Piotrowicz, R. and Uhl, B.H. *Routledge Handbook of Human Trafficking*. London: Routledge, pp. 511-525.
- <sup>xxi</sup> Similar dynamics have been noted in a variety of other, primary food commodities like cocoa (Ryan 2011; also Clapp 2012). See here for detailed reports on value distribution relating to tomatoes: <http://www.flaipuglia.it/stop-caporalato>. Last accessed: 18/07/16.